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ABSTRACT

This study examined white versus black student perceptions of black life chances. One hundred and fifty seven black and white students of Afro-American Studies at a large midwestern university were administered the Thomas Equity Perception Scale (TEPS). Black students perceived more job situation advancements (i.e., initial hire and career development) for whites than for themselves. White students had more of a tendency to see equal opportunity for blacks in America than did blacks. There was no significant sex difference among whites on the TEPS as a general measure. However, on the item regarding initial hire opportunities, white male scores yielded a significant difference compared to black male and female subjects. White males perceived blacks as having more than an equal chance of being hired. (Author/RLV)

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# PERCEPTIONS OF RACIAL EQUITY:

# AN ANALYSIS OF AFRO-AMERICAN STUDIES STUDENTS

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Nearly a decade has passed since Afro-American studies was incorporated into the curriculum of a major university in the United States. With the approval of a degree granting program at Yale in December of 1968 (Robinson, A. et al., p. 235), many institutions of higher learning followed suit as black students sought relevance in their education. The concept of black studies met with opposition from many sectors of academe. Although the news image of the gun-toting black students at Cornell's Africana Studies dominated public awareness, the racial composition of black studies classes varied, reflecting the ideological differences in programs.

Paramount among fears of critics was that Afro-American Studies programs would become breeding grounds for Black militants and their white radical sympathers (U. S. News, 1969). Having taught Afro-American Studies in the University for seven years, it has been this researcher's experience that, in the main, white students in Afro-American Studies courses appear not to differ from white college students in general in their perceptions of the Black's plight in America. Clearly, there are few "Black militants" or "white radicals" enrolled in Afro-American Studies courses today. But it would be reasonable to expect that Black Studies would attract what has come to be called the "white liberal" or perhaps a few "New White Liberals" who, according to Terry (1970, p. 59), are capable of perceiving the problems of blacks as stemming

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from white culture and its institutions.

The purpose of this research project is to study white versus Black student perceptions of Black life chances. It was predicted that there would be a significant difference in how Black and white students of Afro-American Studies perceive the employment opportunities of Blacks in America. In addition, it was postulated that white females would be higher in equity perception than white males. And finally, white males would perceive a more advantageous world for Blacks than would Black students and white female students.

In predicting the significant difference between Black and white student perceptions of job equity, one should note the current beliefs of the Black college students about his fellow white classmates. Chang and Ritter (1976), in their study of ethnocentrism in Black college students, have reported that in comparing Black college students of 1974 to like students in 1953, they found today's student to disagree with anti-Black ideology which meant blaming Blacks themselves for their poor socioeconomic status in America. Black students, in contrast, agreed with anti-white ideology which, for example, was a belief that "white men are by nature prejudiced and bigoted;" and "white people try to keep Black people down." Also, as has been noted elsewhere (Thomas, 1974; Turner and Turner, 1975), Blacks (and other minorities) are gradually socialized to perceive themselves as <u>discriminated against</u>. For northern Blacks, Thomas (1974) suggested that direct racial discrimination is not experienced until young adulthood. Turner and Turner (1975, p. 548) have conjectured "first-hand and second-hand discriminatory" Black experiences by late adolescence. The point, however, is that it is likely that Blacks will probably have developed the capacity to perceive job discrimination even though they have not experienced it.

In understanding the achievement orientation and occupational aspirations of Afro-Americans, the social psychological concept of "locus of control" (generally referred to as the Internal-External or I-E locus of control) has been employed. "Internality" characterizes a person's evaluation of his life being controlled from within, while the "external" person sees reinforcements as independent of one's actions. Advanced by J. B. Rotter and associates (1962), the concept has been incorporated into hundreds of research designs. The I-E scale, when employed on Black subjects has been reconceptualized as a multi-dimensional scale by P. Gurin, et al. (1969); Lao (1970) and Mirels (1970). It is thus suggested that Black subjects most often high in externality on the I-E scale merely demonstrate their accurate perceptions of reality (a high externality score may not be indicative of a Black's personal sense of efficacy and self-esteem).

There are a number of research studies which might help predict how white subjects might respond to questions regarding perceptions of job opportunities for Black Americans; but data regarding whites in Afro-American Studies courses seems sparse. In a national study of white attitudes about Blacks, Campbell (1971) sampled 2,600 subject, 16 to 69 years of age, from 15 cities. When asked the question: "Do you think that in (city) many, some, or only a few Negroes miss out on jobs and promotions because of racial discrimination?" Twenty-two percent of the subjects responded "many;" 34% responded "some;" 26% stated "only a few;" 12% said "none;" while 6% "didn't know." In addition, 86% stated they wouldn't mind having a "qualified" Black as a job superior; and 67% said they favored laws to prevent discrimination against Blacks in job hiring and promotions. However, in the same sample of urban whites, 56% of the subjects believed that Black disadvantages in jobs,

education and housing are due to Blacks themselves rather than discrimination, while only 19% attributed poor conditions to discrimination. It would appear that from this sample, white attitudes toward Black opportunities are indeed multidimensional.

From another area of research, we can perhaps get a better handle on our research problem. The literature associating punitiveness as a personality trait and levels of education with ethnic prejudice is instructive. Hesselbart and Schuman (1976), with data from the 1969 Detroit Area Study, analyzed the responses of 640 white adults with education ranging from elementary school through college. Generally, as perceived racial discrimination increased, education of the subjects increased. And, as perceived racial discrimination increased, punitiveness decreased. According to Hesselbart and Schuman (1976):

> Both the better educated and the less punitive appear more tolerant and sympathetic to Black problems /p. 111/.

If it be the case that our college age sample of white students is less punitive, more tolerant and sympathetic, then it is reasonable to assume that they would be more receptive to information regarding the plight of Blacks in America. They then should be more "hip" and knowledgeable of the role institutional racism plays on the average Afro-American. Turner and Turner (1975), in their study of perceptions of occupational structure among college students, employed the theoretical framework of Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. This writer concurs that:

> With regard to discrimination against blacks... dissonance is created by conflict with the American value that occupational discrimination on the basis of race is unfair. Thus cognitive dissonance theory leads to the prediction that whites, in an attempt to reduce the dissonance between

> the value that racial discrimination is unfair and the perception that blacks hold low-prestige jobs, will tend to perceive significantly less racial discrimination than will blacks [Turner and Turner, 1975, pp. 346].

For the second prediction, it was thought that white females would be higher in equity perceptions than white males because, as Alice Rossi (1969) suggested:

> ...women have tended to play the passive, adaptive role in the past, they have not been prominent as social and political critics of American institutions [p. 16].

Finally, given the recent clamor from white males regarding preferential treatment of women and minorities (see: "The Postponement of Economic Equality" by Herbert Hill, 1977) and claims of "reverse discrimination," it was predicted that white males would perceive Blacks receiving more than their share of opportunities. White males would perceive significantly greater advantages for Blacks than Blacks themselves perceive.

## Methodology

Sample. The subjects were 157 Black (43%) and white (57%) students enrolled in four Afro-American Studies courses at a major midwestern university during the year of 1977. Seventy-seven percent of the subjects were raised in the northern Midwest while 15% were from the East and 5% and 3% southern and western states, respectively. On a self report, the average Black perceived himself or herself as lower middle class; while whites indicated they were middle class. All but eight of the students were undergraduates.

Procedure. During the first week of the semester all students were admini-

stered the research instrument which consisted of six demographic questions and the Thomas Equity Perception Scale (TEPS) of eight items. TEPS presented the subjects with eight employment conditions: initial hire; pay increases; job classification; training opportunities; job stability; ability to transfer; promotions; and supervisory opportunities. In each item, the subject was given a Black-white job situation. With questions arranged to prevent response set, each subject was asked (with regard to job opportunities) if the chances of a Black or white person was "more," "somewhat" or that "all stand an equal chance, color makes no difference." Each response to the scale items was coded from -2 to +2. The dependent variable score for each subject was a total of all eight items. A t-test for mean differences was performed for comparisons in predictions one and two. A significance level of .05 was adopted.

## Results

To test the major prediction that white students would perceive the world of work for Blacks in more equitable terms than would Black subjects, a t-test for difference in mean scores was performed on the dependent variable. (The dependent variable was the summed scores on the eight item Thomas Equity Perception Scale /$\overline{\text{TEPS}}$/.) Cronbach's (1970) Alpha coefficient for reliability of TEPS was .78.

Black students' TEPS mean score (Table 1) of 7.206 proved to be significantly higher than the white students' mean of 3.663 ($t = 4.51$, p. 001). Thus, the Black students perceived more job situation opportunities for whites in American than for Afro-Americans.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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As for the second prediction, there was no significant difference between white males and white females; mean scores were 3.54 and 3.73 respec-

tively (t = .174, p. 862).

In the third prediction, it was hypothesized the white males would perceive significantly greater advantages for Blacks than Blacks themselves would perceive. Perceived "advantage" for this research purpose was defined as the percentage of advantage responses by race on the scale--i.e., "somewhat" or "more" likely (compared to straight "equity" responses). Table 2 indicates that the total average "Black advantage" responses given by white male subjects paralleled those of the Black students. In the "somewhat likely" category, whites responded 6% of the time (compared to 4% for Blacks), and in the "more likely" category, the white response was 5% (with 4% for Blacks).

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Insert Table 2 about here

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## Further Analyses

As indicated in Table 3, Black and white significant differences occurred on all TEPS items, with the exception of scale item "likely hire." On the scale item "likely hire," the mean scores for Black and white subjects were .117 and -.224 respectively. The white mean of -.224 is interpreted as whites slightly perceiving Blacks as having a better than even chance at being hired. However, when the mean score on this item for white males (-.454) is compared to that of all Black subjects, the difference is significant at the .05 level (t - 1.98, p. 050).

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Insert Table 3 about here

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Table 4 gives Black-white responses by percentages on each of the eight scale items.

It appears that, on the average, 49% of the time whites saw the Black having an equal chance in employment situations. Blacks perceived equal

opportunities in 26% of job situations. From Table 4, it would appear that from the perspective of both Black and white subjects, the "edge" is given to whites regarding employment in general. Neither Black nor white subjects give Blacks a sizeable advantage. Four percent of the Blacks responded that it would be "somewhat likely" the Black would get opportunities in job situations as a whole. Four percent said Blacks are "more likely." White subjects responded in kind with 5 and 4 percent, respectively.

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Insert Table 4 about here

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As for perceiving the white advantage, Blacks responded to "somewhat likely" 29% of the time and said that the job situation was "more" to the whites' advantage 38% of the time. The corresponding responses of white subjects to the "white advantage" was 22% "somewhat" and 19% "more" likely to do better in the world of work.

Finally, it is worth noting that on the question of a "better job" for a Black or white high school student with equal grade average, at the same high school and course of study, Blacks responded 29% of the time that the situation favors whites "somewhat," and 50% said that it would be "more" to the white advantage. With regard to white student perception, 29% responded "somewhat" and 33 percent said it was "more likely" that a white would get the better job.

## Discussion

As predicted, the research demonstrated that, for this sample, there is indeed a Black-white difference in perceptions of Black job opportunities in America. With regard to race and sex comparisons, these results mirror the findings of Turner and Turner (1975) who had sampled 2,886 white and 145 Black freshman students drawn at-large from a northeastern university. There

were no significant white sex differences.

Black students in this sample were, in general, not hopeful of receiving equitable treatment over the spectrum of employment situations. However, it was surprising to note that although 45% of the Black subjects perceived whites at an advantageous position regarding the hiring situation, 33% saw their opportunities "somewhat" or "more" likely than whites. Nearly half (49%) of white responses indicated they perceived equal opportunities for Blacks. Forty-one percent of whites saw the white employee at "somewhat" or "more" an advantage in comparison to a 65% cumulative response by Blacks. In terms of all eight job situations presented by TEPS, white females differed from white males only with respect to the initial hire. The white male had a tendency to see Blacks being hired over whites ("somewhat likely" = 15%; "more likely" = 27%).

A t-test comparing the white male mean score (-.455) on the "likely hire" scale item with all Black subjects (mean = .117) yielded a significant difference (t = 1.98, p. 050). This suggests that white females had a tendency to give Blacks an equal or less than equal chance to be hired.

Although some of the white Afro-American Studies students in this research project demonstrated a degree of sympathy for Black conditions in the work world, one could hardly categorize their perceptions as ideologically compatible with their Black colleagues. A statistical analysis of Black-white unemployment, employment, income, levels and categories of employment would easily validate the perceptions of Blacks in this study rather than those of whites. To all who believe in social fairness in this country, and in the light of present day threats to minority group development affirmative

action programs, it is imperative that academics encourage as many white students as possible to enroll in Afro-American studies. Perhaps more information regarding the Black's plight in America might offset the misinformed declarations of "reverse discrimination."

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Table 1

Means and Standard Deviations by

Race and Sex

| Group | Mean | S. D. | N |
|---|---|---|---|
| Blacks | 7.21 | 4.89 | 68 |
| Whites | 3.66 | 4.86 | 89 |
| White females | 3.73 | 4.73 | 56 |
| White males | 3.54 | 5.11 | 33 |

Table 2

Percentages of Total Responses on TEPS Items
by Sex and Race

| Source | Perceived White Advantage | | Perceived Equity | Perceived Black Advantage | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Somewhat | More | | Somewhat | More |
| Blacks | 27 | 38 | 26 | 4 | 4 |
| Whites: | | | | | |
| Females | 17 | 15 | 50 | 9 | 9 |
| Males | 23 | 18 | 47 | 6 | 5 |

TABLE 3

Means and Standard Deviations For The
TEP Scale Dependent Variable Items

| Scale Items | Black Perception (n = 68) | | White Perception (n = 89) | | t Value |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Mean | S.D. | Mean | S.D. | |
| Likely Hire | .117 | 1.430 | -.224 | 1.175 | 1.64 |
| Increase Pay | .750 | .952 | .427 | .796 | 2.31* |
| Better Job | 1.205 | .970 | .865 | 1.013 | 2.12* |
| Training | .867 | 1.049 | .477 | .970 | 2.40* |
| Laid Off | .970 | .913 | .471 | .893 | 3.43* |
| Transfer | 1.000 | 1.106 | .573 | .998 | 2.53* |
| Promote | 1.117 | 1.000 | .449 | .941 | 4.28* |
| Supervisor | 1.176 | .913 | .629 | .934 | 3.67* |

*$p < .05$

TABLE 4

Percentage of
Perceived White Advantage, Equity, and
Black Advantage Responses By Race

| Item | Perceived White Advantage | | | | Equity | | Perceived Black Advantage | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Black | | White | | | | Black | | White | |
| | Somewhat | More | Somewhat | More | Black | White | Somewhat | More | Somewhat | More |
| Likely Hire | 25 | 20 | 11 | 9 | 21 | 49 | 13 | 21 | 9 | 21 |
| Increase Pay | 28 | 26 | 13 | 16 | 43 | 70 | 0 | 3 | 0 | 1 |
| Better Job | 29 | 50 | 29 | 33 | 11 | 28 | 9 | 0 | 7 | 1 |
| Training | 29 | 34 | 20 | 20 | 31 | 48 | 1 | 4 | 10 | 1 |
| Laid Off | 31 | 35 | 21 | 17 | 29 | 56 | 4 | 0 | 3 | 2 |
| Transfer | 26 | 43 | 24 | 22 | 25 | 46 | 0 | 5 | 4 | 3 |
| Promote | 21 | 49 | 26 | 16 | 26 | 49 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| Supervisor | 26 | 47 | 31 | 20 | 25 | 42 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 2 |
| Total Av. Response | 27 | 38 | 22 | 19 | 26 | 49 | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 |